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Fort Wayne in canal days

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Fort Wayne. Wabash-Erie Canal

Fort Wayne In Canal Days

The idea of the Wabash-Erie canal originated in Fort Wayne with Fort Wayne men, for the benefit of Fort Wayne. The building of the canal and its temporary success was responsible for the growth of this out post from a small village to a thriving city of several thousand population. The varying success of the canal was of much importance in the development of the political and economic fortunes of the leaders of the city.

Tradition has ascribed the canal idea to this or that man, but no one person can be accredited with that distinction. A most outstanding claimant for the original idea was George Washington. He reported conditions in 1784 and recommended that the Wabash and Miami (Maumee) rivers be connected by a canal. There is no doubt that the early French explorers, as they trudged through the forest and swamps of the portage, paddling quietly along a connecting water way. One of the most insignificant of these early claimants was a Quaker who came to teach the Indians improved methods of agriculture. His efforts at teaching failed, but his observations concerning the need of a canal were correct. None of these early ideas are of consequence because nothing developed from them. It required no particular far-sightedness to see the advisability of a canal, but it did necessitate great patience, perseverance,

and determination for the realization of that dream.

Samuel Hanna of Fort Wayne must receive credit for actually pushing the canal idea through to its finish. Probably in 1823, Judge Hanna and David Burr of Jackson County, were engaged in informal conversation when the idea was first seriously considered. The conversation was probably held in the summer house of the Hanna residence at the north west corner of Barr & Berry Streets. The idea developed into definite form. The two men opened correspondence with the senators and representatives of Indiana in congress and finally created enough interest to obtain the necessary legislation. Their dream was to connect the navigable waters of the Wabash and Maumee. They had no thought of extending the canal all the way to Evansville.

Judge Hanna was a member of the first board of canal commissioners, in the state legislature, on the judicial bench, and head of the Fort Wayne branch of the State Bank. In addition, he made the difficult trip to New York and purchased the surveyor's instruments used in surveying the canal, and worked at much of the actual surveying. He was likewise interested in every other form of public improvement especially plank roads and at a later time, railroads.

Fort Wayne, prior to the canal, was a typical midwestern settlement, straggling over a considerable amount of territory along the three rivers. It was carelessly laid out and its

streets were unkept. There were however many ambitious men here, who manifested anxiety to see their town surpass all others in the state. The town was formally laid out and surveyed about 1822. Before that time, the houses had been built chiefly on two roads which are now Columbia and Barr streets. These roads were not true to the cardinal points of the compass. The survey was made accordingly to save the locations of the buildings already constructed. The original plat was from Superior on the north to Wayne on the south and from Calhoun to Barr, east and west. Time after time, reference is made of the extremely swampy condition of the streets. At one time the citizens on Calhoun street north of Main were insistent on having board walks because the mud and water made the streets impassable. An ordinance was passed in 1842, requiring that ponds of stagnant water be drained from vacant lots. Very nearly all the buildings were of wooden construction and very few of them were more than one story high. The fort, near Old Fort Place on east Main street, was a very conspicuous part of the town. In addition to the portion originally plotted, there were some scattered houses on the other side of the St. Mary's river and also a few in what is now Lakeside. Indian reservations were scattered all about the vicinity of Fort Wayne until after the removal of the Indians. The straggling little frontier town did not present a very impressive picture.

Through the enthusiastic efforts of a number of Indiana citizens, Congress finally enacted to pass a law which made

possible the construction of the canal. This law provided a land grant of alternate sections for five miles on each side of the proposed canal. It was believed that the sale of this land would give the necessary money for the construction of the canal. Some serious debate took place in the Indiana legislature as to the merits of a canal as contrasted with a railroad. The canal party was victorious and the state launched its ill fated task.

Ground was broken for the canal on Washington's birthday 1832. Fort Wayne was chosen as the site for this celebration. The ceremonies were impressive and quite fitting for an undertaking that was expected to do as much for the community as were the hopes for the canal. Charles W. Ewing gave the principal address. He lauded the state for beginning such a task, and assured the people of the success of the work. Preceding the address, the entire population of the town gathered at the Masonic building near the north east corner of Harrison and Columbia streets and marched to the designated place. They were led by a military band of two pieces. The place chosen to start the construction work was where the feeder canal and the main line joined. This place was just back of the present site of the Wayne knitting mills on the right of way of the Nickle Plate railroad. The main line of the canal followed all the way through Fort Wayne on what is now that right of way. The feeder canal was a short branch built for about five miles up the St. Joseph river for the purpose of bringing

a water supply into the main line. This canal came down the St. Joseph river on the right bank from a place near Robison park. Instead of approaching the main canal directly by crossing the St. Mary's river, it branched off west and joined at the place already indicated. Very definite remains of the old feeder canal can yet be seen along north Clinton Street just north of the City Power plant.

Charles Wayne Ewing, the orator of the ground breaking ceremonies was the oldest of five sons of Alexander Ewing. All of these sons were important in the early history of Fort Wayne and the middle west. Charles W. Ewing was born and educated in Ohio. He was the first lawyer who came to Fort Wayne having settled here in 1822. He was an able speaker and an energetic enthusiast of all public undertakings. It was only natural that he should be chosen to deliver the oration.

✓ The first contract for canal construction was awarded to William Rockhill. This contractor was a public spirited man who had come to Fort Wayne from New Jersey. He had entered a large tract of land in the western portion of the present city now known as the Rockhill additions. One of his most notable early adventures was the building of the Rockhill house. This was located where the St. Joseph's hospital now stands. Many of these contractors were men of public spirit and ability. Another prominent contractor was Jesse Vermilyea. He was born in New York but had come to Fort Wayne in the early twenties. He engaged in farming and trading with the Indians and accumu-

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lated a fortune. He was one of the original directors of the Fort Wayne branch bank. His canal contracts were all on the summit section. During his later days he conducted the famous Vermilyea house on the canal about fourteen miles southwest of Fort Wayne.

Conditions in Fort Wayne and vicinity can be understood by looking at some of the figures concerning labor. The country along the canal was sparsely settled and could not furnish ample workmen. The native farmers were compelled to spend their energy on the cultivation of their farms for two thirds of the time that the weather permitted canal work. The only solution was to bring laborers in from some other part of the country. Accordingly, agents were sent into New York state where it was said there was an abundance of workmen. These agents were instructed to offer thirteen dollars per month, and to advance passage money. Under this arrangement many German and Irish workmen came. After working on the canal, they usually settled in the neighborhood and thereby provided much of the genesis of our Irish and German population. An advertisement published in the Indiana Journal of August 4, 1832 read as follows:

We wish to employ laborers on the
Wabash and Erie canal, twelve miles west
of Fort Wayne.

The situation is healthy and dry.
We will pay \$10 per month for sober and
industrious men.

The price offered for labor in this advertisement is in line with other prices of the time. The estimate of costs as given by the canal commissioners in their report for 1830 is as follows: Labor was estimated at \$8.00 per month, flour at \$4.00 per barrel, and bacon at five cents per pound. Estimates for the entire cost were based on figures of this type which were entirely too low. The commissioners failed to anticipate that scarcity of labor would increase the value of it and that a greater demand for food stuffs would have the same effect on them.

After laborers were obtained, the question of food and shelter came up. Camps had to be constructed and food supplies provided. There was also a great deal of time lost in the movement of equipment. Keeping the men on the job was another serious problem. There was a fear of sickness which made many men leave the camps. The ground west of Fort Wayne was low and swampy, with water standing on it most of the time. This led to the belief that malaria was prevalent.

The dam across the St. Joseph river near the site of Robison Park was one of the important "works" on the canal. This dam was constructed to create a lake and to impound a supply water for the summit section. The water was introduced into the main line by means of the feeder canal already mentioned. The building of this dam was an enormous undertaking for that time. The only power available was that of men working with hand tools and horses and mules. Wheelbarrows were the chief

method of moving earth.

The dam was begun in 1832 and not finished until 1834, and then only after a great amount of interference by high water. When finished, the dam was a huge mass of forest trees, sand, and gravel. A base of trees and sand was constructed all the way across the river on which a huge crib was placed. This crib was filled with debris of all kinds to make the actual dam. That in turn was completely covered with gravel, sand and fine brush. When completed, the dam was seventeen feet high from the river bed and was 230 feet long between abutments. The abutments were twenty-five feet high, twenty feet wide, and 110 feet long. They were also built as cribs filled with gravel. The total cost was \$15,397. ✓

Another land mark always associated with the canal in Fort Wayne was the St. Marys Aqueduct. The canal had to be carried over rivers and streams either by creating a pool and crossing at stream level or by constructing a bridge that served as an aqueduct. When the stream was small enough a stone arch or a series of such arches were constructed on which the canal could be built quite successfully. This was not possible for the larger streams and rivers.

The aqueduct across the St. Marys river was located at the present site of the Nickel Plate Railroad bridge. Its grade level was somewhat lower than that of the present bridge. This aqueduct was constructed as two wooden spans resting on

stone abutments. The spans were supported by wooden arches. These timbers were overlapped and bolted together in such a way as to give strength and stability. The floor consisted of heavy timbers covered with earth and the canal was constructed through the structure as if on open ground. It proved to be a constant source of trouble through developing unexpected and costly leaks. A contemporary drawing of the aqueduct shows it connected to the river below with a gigantic icicle. The entire structure was covered with a roof and sided up with boards to protect both structure and canal from the effects of weather conditions.

The aqueduct became famous in town as a swimming hole and has been perpetuated in memory through the efforts of the aqueduct club. This club was composed of men who as boys had gone swimming in the aqueduct.

There were two impressive canal celebrations held in Fort Wayne. The first was in honor of the completion of the middle section, on July 4, 1835, and the second was in honor of the final completion of the canal on July 4, 1843.

The first celebration was a gala day and was accompanied by much gusto and hilarity. Governor Noble had intended to attend and take part in the celebration but was prevented from doing so on account of sickness. General Tipton made a short address and Hugh McCulloch delivered a long oration. The program of the day was ended with a public dinner and an ex-

cursion trip up the feeder canal to the St. Joseph dam "Not less than 500 individuals, including a large portion of the fair sex, were present on this occasion." The canal was open through Fort Wayne from that time until it was finally abandoned.

The second celebration was superior to that of 1835 both in splendor and importance. The ceremonies were held in Thomas Swinney's grove just west of town. The attendance was beyond precedent, people having come from all the larger cities in the midwest. Peter Kiser, an important personality in early Fort Wayne history, furnished the barbecue. He had gone to the prairies near Lafayette and bought two fat oxen hoping to bring them back on a canal boat. The animals, however, proved to be stubborn and would not go aboard. Consequently he drove them back to Fort Wayne at the rate of ten miles per day. General Lewis Cass was the principal orator. A military air was added by the firing of a cannon which had been captured from the British by Admiral Perry on Lake Erie. This cannon later did service as a hitching post at the door of the Honorable F. P. Randall's house, and has since been mounted on the grounds of the local museum. The day ended with a general illumination. Everyone was asked to display lighted candles in their street windows.

✓ Several very fine residences were built in Fort Wayne during canal days. Travellers reported that as they came into the town the brightly lighted windows of these houses were a beautiful sight. This was especially true of the old Hanna

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homestead on East Lewis Street and the McCulloch residence on what is now West Superior Street. Both of these houses were imposing structures situated in spacious grounds. The lawn of the McCulloch house extended to the canal.

Other buildings of a public nature were impressive for that day. Chief among these was probably the Rockhill House at Broadway and Main Streets. The town itself was not of an imposing character. At best, it would have to be described as straggling and unkept. Muddy streets were the rule in wet weather. The shops were unimposing, being housed in dark dingy rooms with doors generally protected by board awnings. The court house square did not include a suitable building of imposing nature until near the end of the canal days.

The people were much like those of other towns of that time. The newspapers included accounts of parties, balls, musicals, weddings, visitors, swindlers, thefts, murder, and a variety of other items. There were lavishly expensive parties which indicated personal pride and social ambition. On the other extreme there were drunken brawls which indicated the presence of rowdyism and debauchery. Fort Wayne was pictured as a town of fine linens and laces as well as rags and calico.

Canal boat building is a lost art. Very little remains of the old boats except tradition and a picture here and there. However, great pride was taken in these structures. The advertisements boast of the best accommodations, state rooms, single

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beds, and unsurpassed comfort. The first one constructed in Fort Wayne was the "Indiana," built in 1834 by F. P. Tinkham. Captains always took much pride in their boats. They all felt a personal interest in the safety of passengers and freight. Some of the names of these captains are in evidence on the present map of Fort Wayne.

Regular lines of boats started operation on the canal and ran on definite schedule. In March, 1848, the following advertisement was published:

"DOYLE AND DICKEY'S DAILY PACKET LINE.

This line of new and splendid packet boats will start from Lafayette on Monday March 27, 1848 at 10 o'clock a. m. arriving at Fort Wayne at 6 p. m. going east. The line at present consists of four boats. On the first of May there will be an addition of three new packets, forming a daily line between Covington, Indiana, and Toledo, Ohio."

The "Ohio," "Indiana," "Illinois," and "Missouri," were the names of these boats. Another interesting notice appeared at the same time. It offered service to Cincinnati in the following terms:

FAST SAILING NIAGARA.

HAS LARGE, WELL FURNISHED CABINS AND

STATE ROOMS.

OFFERS GREATER INDUCEMENTS TO THE

TRAVELLING PUBLIC THAN ANY OTHER

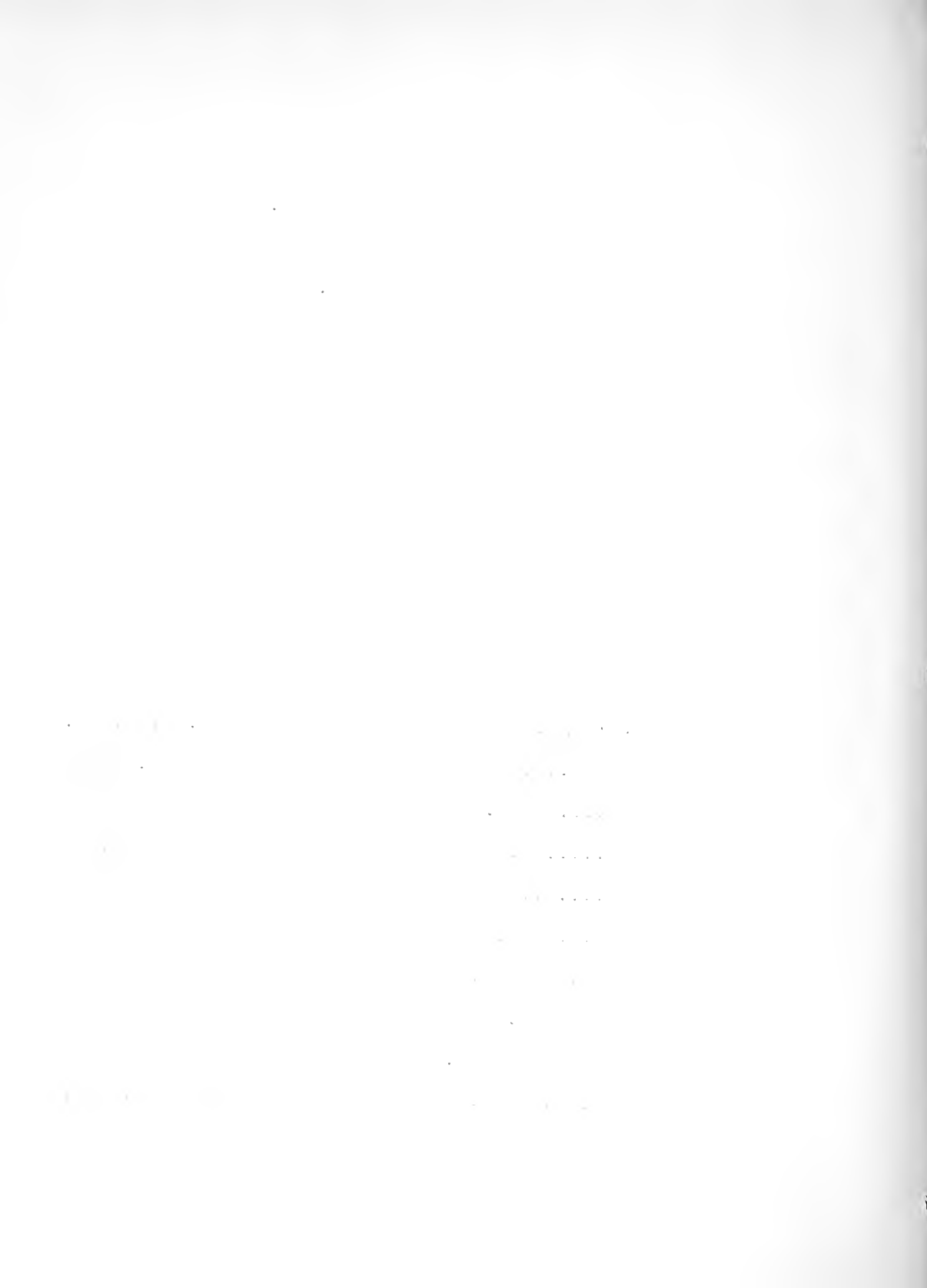
LINE BOAT ON THIS CANAL.

A busy commerce sprang up along the canal front from Calhoun to Lafayette street. Dealers in all kinds of merchandise were constantly announcing their wares. The dock was constructed along the south bank of the canal and served as a fashionable promenade as well as a dock. Buildings were constructed facing this dock with the result that even today an appearance of a water front is discernable from the north. "Not until the day of the railroads did commerce begin to forsake the old water way, and then the city passed forever from an interesting era that people love to chat about."

A list of articles and amounts of produce that were handled at the Fort Wayne station during the year of 1848 indicates something of the nature of this commerce.

The list is given in full:

Miles of boats run.....	463,575	Barrels of lime.....	6,752
Miles of passengers....	1,357,364	Barrels of pork.....	28,677
Barrels of flour.....	78,856	Pounds of lard.....	3,332,101
Bushels of wheat.....	957,395	Pounds of bacon.....	2,293,471
Bushels of corn.....	1,005,640	Pounds of live hogs.....	56,870
Bushels of oats.....	67,389	Pounds of beef and tallow..	16,188
Bushels of rye.....	904	Lbs. of hair and bristles..	75,145
Bushels of barley.....	2,638	Lbs. of deer and coon skin.	38,377
Bushels of seeds.....	14,300	Lbs. of feathers.....	9,157
Bushels of beans.....	127	Lbs. of wool.....	88,074
Bushels of mineral coal...	28,300	Lbs. of cranberries.....	534,055
Barrels of whiskey.....	5,977	Lbs. of merchandise.....	8,583,048



Barrels of salt.....	75,878 Lbs. of sugar, molasses...	1,387,892
Barrels of fish.....	1,488 Lbs. of coffee.....	1,575,642
Barrels of oil.....	316 Lbs. of tobacco.....	586,139
Lbs. of white lead, etc...	565,740 Lbs. of iron nails.....	3,446,072
Lbs. of furniture.....	1,196,942 Lbs. of agr. implements	99,241
Lbs. of wood ware.....	108,397 Lbs. marble mill stones.....	634,987
Lbs. of butter.....	174,852 Lbs. of cheese.....	134,931
Lbs. of hides.....	45,999 Lbs. of pearl pot ashes.....	481,817
Lbs. of staves, hoops, and poles.....		1,054,468
Cords of wood.....	7,975 Perches of stone.....	14,607
Feet of lumber.....	3,323,015 Number of laths.....	103,000
Thousands of shingles.....	6,569 Feet of timber.....	34,322
Number of posts and rails		11,015
Kegs of beer.....	832 Lbs. of stoneware.....	101,787
Lbs. of leather.....	247,304 Lbs. of saleratus.....	70,603
Lbs. of beeswax.....	46,443 Lbs. of misc.....	3,668,848

The total tonnage for the year was only 157,851, which does not seem large for this day. However, the population in 1850 was only about 10,000. ✓

Just what part the canal played in growth of population is difficult to determine. Many believe that it was all important while others believe that the city would have developed about the same without the canal. Nevertheless the end of the canal era was the end of a romantic era of Fort Wayne history.

HECKMAN
BINDERY INC.



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N. MANCHESTER,
INDIANA 46962

